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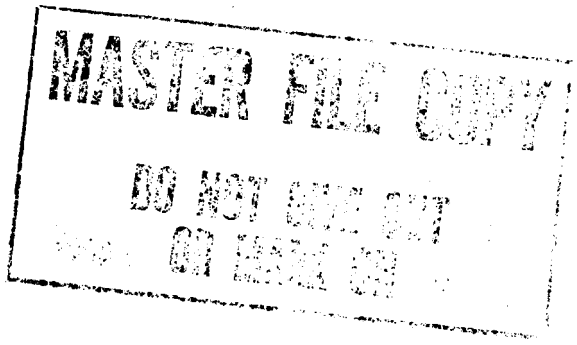
France: Prospects for the Opposition (U)

National Intelligence Council
Memorandum



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France: Prospects for the Opposition (U)

Summary

In the presidential and legislative elections last spring, the French voters gave President Francois Mitterrand and the parties of the left the power to bring about a profound transformation of the structures of French society and the economy. The voters did not, however, give the Socialist-led government anywhere near the popular mandate for change it claims. The demographic base for the left is solid, but the elections were closer than they appeared and the nature and extent of the change desired by the voters was ambiguous.

Hardening opposition within the business community and the center-right political parties to the government's plans thus has potentially broader support within the country than the narrow parliamentary base of the opposition would suggest. True, the absolute majority of the Socialists in parliament means that they can override opposition to their plans to nationalize major industries and banks; but obtaining cooperation from business in combating unemployment—now at 2 million—and in creating new private investment is proving difficult. Polls indicate that 83 percent of business executives have not changed their hiring policies, and more than half of French medium and small businesses have no plans to invest. Private enterprise has been mollified by the presence in the government of such ministers as the moderate and respected Jacques Delors at Finance, but disconcerted by taxation measures that will increase labor costs and by proposals for worker participation in management that will erode managerial authority.

The center-right represents up to 48 percent of the electorate and its main argument—that the French voters do not want radical change [1]—has merit. The Socialist victory last spring had many unique aspects that were circumstantial and unrelated to the appeal of a new model of socialism. Among them were: the spoiler role played by Gaullist leader Jacques Chirac and the two other Gaullist presidential candidates, Michel Debre and Marie-France Garaud; the disavowal of Communist leader Georges Marchais by a million Communist voters; the personal rejection of ex-President Giscard by many Gaullists and centrists.

The center-right actually outpolled the left in the first round of the presidential election: the four candidates of the right won just under 49

[1] The conservative *Le Figaro* likens the average Socialist voter to an individual who thinks he is attending Mass but finds out he is expected to enroll in the Trappist Order.

percent of the vote to the left's 47 percent. And the Socialist sweep in the subsequent legislative election—frequently described as a landslide—came not from an increase in the left's strength—the left polled about what it did in 1978—but from a severe dip in the right's score, largely caused by abstentions.

The Socialists nonetheless appear determined to change the way economic power is used in order to reduce inequalities and stimulate the economy. Both Mitterrand and Prime Minister Mauroy have even warned that socialism will become "more radical" if the opposition continues to resist; that is, that they will no longer restrain Socialist Party elements pressing for more rapid implementation of campaign promises. For the time being, the government and the Socialist Party are playing a game of carrot and stick: Mauroy and Mitterrand preach moderation and consensus, while the Socialist Party talks of class struggle—its main targets are the banks, certain upper levels of the administration, and the Patronat (the leading French employers organization), which has been traditionally close to the Gaullist party.

It is a delicate game, difficult to sustain in the current atmosphere of acrimonious confrontation between left and right. Twenty-three years in opposition have created an adversarial mentality in the Socialists that the attaining of government power has not dislodged, and the right's mistrust of Socialist intentions is profound. In addition, the French Socialists' inexperience and fear of failure—some call it the Allende complex—are such that they are overly defensive and the opposition may eventually shape itself up enough to be able to take advantage of it.

At present, the center-right is in the process of organizing itself and choosing its targets, conscious that—barring economic debacle—it will be out of power at least until the legislative election of 1986. But in the meantime its cooperation and good will is needed if the socialist experiment is to have a chance to succeed.

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Mitterrand's Mandate

It is difficult to sort out what was circumstantial in the center-right's defeat last spring and what had deeper causes. It will never be known now whether a better organized campaign by ex-President Giscard could have overcome his handicaps: the wear and tear of power and the prospect of seven more years of the same; Giscard's haughty personal style and gradual loss of contact with political realities; the handicaps of inflation and unemployment; the divisions and even "treachery" within the center-right; a pervasive "throw the rascals out" attitude, plus a strong desire for change. Giscard had to make a strong effort to reverse elements unfavorable to himself; Mitterrand had only to be himself and talk to young voters of their roots, of history, socialism, justice, and freedom, while stressing Giscard's economic shortcomings.

What is clear is that Giscard needed both the cooperation of the Gaullists and the indirect support of the Communists to win. He received neither. The Communist Party leadership, who wanted Mitterrand's defeat but could not provoke it in too visible a fashion, helped bring about his victory. One-fourth of Communist voters—a million—gave their votes to Mitterrand in the first round of the presidential elections, and Communist leader Marchais' paltry score of 15 percent removed the fear of moderate voters that a Socialist government would be held hostage by the Communists. Faced with Mitterrand's good showing in the first round, the Communist leadership capitulated and urged their voters to vote for Mitterrand in the second.

As for the Gaullists, even had Gaullist leader Chirac been less equivocal in public [redacted] about his support for Giscard, it is questionable that the voters would have followed his instructions given the barrage of Gaullist criticism of the Giscard government, which dates from Chirac's resignation in 1976, and a Gaullist antipathy toward Giscard so strong that 800,000 voters who had first cast their ballots for Chirac did not vote for Giscard in the final round. Giscard shares part of the responsibility for this antipathy, for he never seriously tried to heal the divisions in the ex-majority. His goal—as expressed in his book *French Democracy*—was to incarnate the spirit of a new middle class majority located somewhere between the disadvantaged and the most advantaged, whose political goals are poised between revolution and conservatism. But by cutting himself off from the Gaullists, he risked opening the way to the Socialist accession to power.

Some aspects of the defeat could have been mitigated; for example, the personal rejection of a President who had progressively lost his "human dimension" and had been touched by personal scandal; and the loss of confidence in ex–Prime Minister Raymond Barre, who probably should have been replaced. But it was above all a badly run election campaign marked by strategic errors by Giscard and his staff that made the center-right more vulnerable. After the "divine surprise" of the left's defeat in the legislative election of 1978, the former majority was too confident that the left had been historically and definitively beaten, overlooking the left's success in local elections in 1977. It was on this base that the left would build for its victory in 1981. In addition, the 1981 presidential and legislative elections themselves set up their own dynamic, with the Socialist Party later profiting from the euphoria and bandwagon effect of Mitterrand's presidential victory.

It can be argued, however, that the Socialist victory came not from a great leftist *elan* but from a drop in rightist support. The left's score in the second round at the legislative election in 1981 was about what it was in 1978, but the right lost 10 points compared with 1978. Many voters who habitually voted for the right—particularly wage earners and people of modest origin—felt they could not in conscience vote for

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the left but chose to abstain, apparently hoping there might be something to be gained from a Socialist victory. Other formerly rightist voters evidently believed that the proper functioning of French institutions required that both parliament and the Elysee have the same political orientation, which led them also to abstain.

And, ironically, the two-round electoral system set up to help the Gaullists, and which the Socialists had repeatedly attacked, gave the Socialists a bonus of seats. It is questionable whether the Socialists' 285 seats in the 491-seat parliament, which consigns France's three other major parties to the political sidelines, represents their true popular strength. The Communists have repeatedly pointed out that if the elections had been held under proportional representation, which the Socialists have long advocated, the Communists' 44 seats would have been doubled.

But there were other causes of the defeat that the center-right knows it must redress if it is to regain power. Wage earners make up more than 80 percent of the French work force, but the Giscardians had gradually lost touch with them, and with the young. After a reformist start (for which some of his electorate never forgave him), Giscard's policies became more conservative. He became more a manager than an innovator and ceased trying to be a "centrist" president to what was largely a rightist electorate. He was also at a disadvantage since his party was only a junior partner in a coalition in which many of the senior Gaullists viewed him as a usurper.

In addition, the electoral base for the moderate left has been growing over the last 20 years at the expense of the conservative and Communist parties. The influence of the Catholic Church in traditionally conservative areas has lessened as the country has become de-Christianized and has become transformed; Catholics concerned by social justice have become more likely to vote Socialist. The peasant class, bastion of the right, has virtually disappeared. In fact, of the three pillars of the traditional right—the Patronat, local notables, and the clergy—only the Patronat remains strong. It can be asked then why France did not vote left before 1981. Part of the reason lies in the existence until recently of a strong Communist party. Another reason is that socioeconomic status does not necessarily dictate a political choice: cultural, family, and regional factors intrude.

The diffusion of middle class ideas, new categories of workers and voters, and the entry of more women in the labor force all helped the French Socialists, who have a strong appeal for the middle class; at almost every level of the salaried hierarchy, Mitterrand attracted more voters than Giscard. These included sectors where the Giscardians thought they had an advantage—middle- and upper-level managers, the liberal professions, and the retired. Also helping the leftist victory were the perceived economic failures of the outgoing administration; two-digit inflation, and a regular increase in unemployment.

The left in power is a sociological paradox—a phenomenon of modernity in that it represents the integration of rural areas, formerly conservative and Catholic, at least temporarily into the leftist tradition. One of the most ironic aspects of the spring elections is that the emergence of a new cultural-sociological majority that Giscard had foreseen and encouraged ultimately profited Mitterrand.

Does this mean that electoral demography condemns the center-right to impotence? To the extent that its defeat was self-inflicted, no. To the extent that a key swing vote—perhaps as much as 10 percent—no longer considers itself bound by party labels and is willing to shift between left and right, no. The increasing difficulties of daily life and the failure of the Socialists to cope adequately may also eventually push the middle classes back into the arms of the center-right. Obviously, the political opposition's prospects rise as the ruling party falters.

But barring economic upheaval caused by Socialist policies, the center-right is probably condemned to a cure in opposition of at least five years. The next legislative election is in 1986, the presidential in 1988.

There are, however, cantonal elections in 1982 and municipal elections in 1983; both the government and opposition will be watching these elections for signs of a shift in voter sympathy.

Confusion in the Opposition: After the Election

Giscard and the UDF. Within the amorphous UDF (Union for French Democracy), the umbrella organization of Republicans, centrists, and Radicals that backed Giscard in 1978, the conditions that contributed to the center-right's defeat still exist and have become more acute with the loss of the assets of incumbency. Giscard, who once provided the cement of power to a group that was never cohesive, now divides the UDF. The centrists believe that "Christian Democracy" or even "Social Democracy" has more of a future than Giscardism, dream of a centrist presidential candidate, and want to mark their autonomy. The Radicals, who now have only two deputies in parliament, are even more restive. All realize, however, that any splintering of the UDF will make it easier for Chirac to become leader of the opposition and severely damage their chances in future elections.

The UDF is likely to stay together, at least as a parliamentary group perhaps under some other name, and work out some method of dialogue and cooperation with the RPR on parliamentary and electoral matters. Both the UDF and RPR are united in opposition to most Socialist/Communist projects. They differ somewhat on tactics, with the RPR advocating systematic, unequivocal opposition and the UDF pushing for a more selective approach.

Although before the spring elections there was talk of defections from the UDF if the Socialists won, it is unlikely that any of its elements will seek or be offered accommodation with the Socialists. The Socialists' large majority, the presence of Communists in the government, and the Socialists' mistrustful, sectarian approach toward the ex-majority (the ex-majority returns the favor) have produced a polarization that has kept almost all opposition elements firmly in opposition. In that sense, Mitterrand has given the opposition a unity that it could not achieve when it was the governing coalition.

Giscard is eager to reenter the political fray and is known to be contemplating pruning those elements from the UDF who oppose him to form a new liberal party that he hopes will occupy the space between the Socialists on the left and the Gaullists on the right. But troops are scarce now that the Socialists have co-opted so many centrist voters. And it is difficult to exercise leadership when most of Giscard's advisers are urging him to hold back until the aura of defeat dissipates, his credibility is reestablished, and Socialist popularity starts to decline.

Giscard is holding himself in tactical reserve. He has a political staff in Paris, his loyalists are forming new study groups to develop themes and programs, and he has a key spokesman in Jean-Francois Deniau, Giscardian ex-minister and political strategist. Giscard's popularity increased six points in an October poll—to 44 percent—perhaps indicating that his advisers were right; Chirac polled 36 percent, Barre 34 percent. Chirac takes the lead, however, when it becomes a question of who should lead the opposition.

There is a young group within Giscard's own Republican Party (PR), however, that is not totally committed to Giscard. They believe that although Giscard may have a political future, some other leader and potential presidential candidate may emerge. This group, in which Francois Leotard, a deputy from southern France, appears to be a rising star, has its own political ambitions and would like to wrest the party leadership away from unconditional Giscard loyalists. They favor elections at all levels of the UDF and a more collegial leadership.

Giscard's Republican Party, the largest component in the UDF, has come a long way from the elitist groups that first rallied around Giscard. But, though numerous, it is still not a real political party. In the past no true Giscardian party apparat existed, since both strategy and tactics were dictated principally from the Elysee. Loyalty to Giscard and his "advanced liberal society" is still the major guiding principle for most in the PR, and genuine, ideological debate has been scant. The party lacks the tried and tested political

personalities that have made their way up through the ranks of the Socialist Party. Giscardians have been notably absent from union activity and other social/interest groups. A younger generation of Giscardians is trying to remedy this by targeting the young civil servants, salaried workers, and technicians who voted for Giscard in 1978 but switched to Mitterrand in 1981. It is hard, however, for the new opposition to unlearn its bad habits quickly.

The absence of a real Republican Party, which was certainly due in large part to Giscard's authoritarian and loner style of leadership, ultimately worked against the ex-President, for it deprived him of a useful barometer of influence and information and of a mechanism by which a younger generation of leaders could be developed. Giscard clearly counted on a second seven-year presidential term to prepare for his succession. He is now almost certainly aiming at a second run for the presidency in 1988, at which time he will be 62, younger than Mitterrand was when he assumed the presidency.

But Giscard is no longer calling all the shots and some of his attempts to impose his will on the UDF from behind the scenes have failed. Giscard's future probably hinges to a great extent not only on the incumbent regime's failures but on his ability to project an image of a "new Giscard"—less authoritarian and more attuned to change; less precious and more compassionate. Giscard's assets are: his age, 55, which gives him time to create a new political image; a political base (he received 48 percent of the vote in the recent presidential election and there are over 200 political clubs loyal to him); and the prestige—a bit tarnished—of having been chief of state.

Chirac and the Gaullists. Chirac's strategy is simple: a) be prepared to harvest the fruits of discontent and disorder once Socialist policies fail; and b) reestablish order and reinstitute the old rules of French capitalism, eschewing the "advanced liberal democracy" of which Giscard was so enamored. Chirac's tactics aim first at capturing new local offices for the RPR (Rally for the Republic in the municipal elections in 1983, in which his own seat as major of Paris will be at stake. Chirac hopes for a smashing personal victory in Paris and is likely to get it, for more than 60 percent of Parisians are happy with his energetic stewardship of the city.

The RPR is strong in militants but weak in elected officials: at least 50 of France's 95 departments have no RPR deputies in the National Assembly. In addition, because it was the old hands in the RPR who survived the Socialist election victory—77 percent of RPR deputies are more than 50 years old (as compared with 29 percent of Socialist deputies). Chirac hopes to rejuvenate the RPR and enlarge its political base by bringing under its wing individuals who supported his presidential candidacy (he received 18 percent of the vote) but had no previous ties to the RPR. He hopes to do this in part through a new political club (Club 89) whose goal is to define a contemporary definition of Gaullism. Chirac obviously hopes to "recenter" a movement both his allies and adversaries place on the right of the political spectrum.

Although there certainly must be some grumbling within the RPR over Chirac's partial responsibility for giving France seven years of Socialist rule, he appears to be master of his party, whether or not he reassumes the RPR presidency, which he gave up to run for president last spring. Gaullist barons, such as Oliver Guichard, who supported Giscard in the Giscard-Chirac feud, have returned to the fold, illustrating again de Gaulle's description of the Gaullists: "the Gaullists are like wolves—they devour each other, but hunt together."

As for Giscard, many Gaullists think—perhaps wishfully—that for the ex-President "the page has turned." Chirac has multiplied conciliatory gestures toward the UDF, estimating—perhaps correctly—that the number of Giscardians with an undying loyalty toward Giscard who are motivated by revenge against Chirac are few.

Chirac's analysis of the center-right's electoral defeat focuses on the wear and tear of the many years in power and on Giscard's "inability to adapt to the

evolution of French society." He believes, as he said frequently during his presidential campaign, that Barre should have concentrated on unemployment rather than inflation and believes that the center-right can regain the some 3 million votes it lost between March 1978 and June 1981. Wherein lies the opposition's major problem: to regain power for whose benefit?

Chirac would be a logical choice if his scenario of Socialist failure/cum disorder actually takes place. Whether or not he can win over sufficient Giscardian and centrist voters to be a credible presidential candidate in 1988 is another matter. That he is determined to do so and has a comparatively united party behind him are among Chirac's assets, not the least of which is his ability to tack into whatever wind seems to be blowing in his direction. Chirac is at a disadvantage, however, in that the Socialists have managed to co-opt a considerable portion of Gaullist voters as well as at least a part of the Gaullist heritage: a strong role for France in the world, national independence founded on the *force de frappe*, presidential power. Chirac also has a credibility gap because of his long association with the Giscardian government.

New Faces. The fall parlimentary season has made stars of a number of young RPR and UDF deputies. Among them are: Jacques Toubon, an RPR deputy from Paris and a close associate of Chirac; Francois d'Aubert (UDF), Charles Millon (UDF), and Jacques Godfrain (RPR). Whether they are acting as stalking horses for their respective chiefs or have a political future is not yet clear. Particularly in the UDF, young stars tend to appear and then disappear with frequency.

Another old "new face" in the opposition is ex–Prime Minister Raymond Barre, who was brilliantly reelected deputy in the midst of an overall electoral debacle in which the center-right lost half of its seats. His acerbic wit and didactic manner, coupled with his lack of a political party base, makes him an unlikely prospect for opposition leader, but he should probably not be counted out. At the least, he will be an effective and eloquent spokesman for the opposition in parliament.

Another ex–Prime Minister, Jacques Chaban-Delmas, who tried to sell former President Pompidou a Gallic version of the Johnsonian "great society," appears to be developing his own personal style of opposition. He does not believe in an early comeback for Giscard nor does he think Chirac is the man of the hour. He hopes for a new liberal center-left, as does Olivier Stirn, a former minister under Giscard. Stirn announced this month the organization of a new "social liberal" movement, which will try to reconcile Social Democracy and economic liberalism. He claims that his movement, which will hold its first convention in February, will bring together deputies, union members, and personalities like Edgar Faure and Simone Veil. Stirn reproaches the ex-center-right majority for its "dogmatism."

However laudable such attempts may be to give the opposition a more center-left orientation, they run up against the present two-round voting system, which condemns Giscardians and Gaullists to cooperation, at least on the second round. Proportional representation, which the Socialists are on record as favoring, could make a big difference in party alignments. However, it is most unlikely that the Socialists would introduce a form of proportional representation that risked undermining their local and regional control. Current Socialist plans are apparently to see how the 1983 municipals go and then reconsider PR.

The Socialists still hold most of the cards. They have the time and the will to create a new model of socialism and if they master the economy, Mitterrand will be considered a great and innovative president. The question is whether the Socialists will be sufficiently flexible if their experiment starts to falter. This is as true of the moderates as it is of the party's dogmatic, sectarian wing.

Status of the Center-Right. None of the issues that agitate the center-right opposition arouse great popular interest. Neither nationalizations, which a majority of the French support in the belief that they mean job security; the wealth tax; nor the 1982 budget, which has a large deficit, are controversial on a broad

scale. Such issues have, however, given the formal political opposition a target against which it can tentatively unite for the first time since its electoral defeat last spring.

The center-right has been durably changed and deeply shaken by its defeat. Its magnitude has strengthened elements within it who want to create more democratic party structures and rejuvenate them, build up grass-roots support and—in the Giscardian Union for French Democracy (UDF) look for new leadership. How this will square with the authoritarian tendencies of Gaullist leader Jacques Chirac, ex-President Giscard and ex–Prime Minister Barre remains to be seen.

So far the Giscardian UDF and the Gaullist Rally for the Republic (RPR) parliamentary groups have been working well together. In large part this represents the willingness of a younger generation to forget the personal quarrels of their leaders. The staffs of the two parties, minus Chirac and UDF head Jean Lecanuet but with their blessing, met in late October for the first time since the spring election to set up a permanent coordinating commission. Coordination will be limited to those issues on which the two parties agree, primarily electoral and parliamentary matters.

But the three superstars of the opposition—Chirac, Giscard, and Barre—are neither of an age nor temperament to renounce their political ambitions

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Former Economics Minister Rene Monory, who has been organizing business and stockholder opposition to government policies, is also seen by some as a darkhorse for leadership of the opposition.

The Socialists are solidly implanted now on both the local and national level. Most in the opposition expect to be out of power for at least five years—the next legislative election is in 1986—and are concerned about hanging on to voters and militants. Others think that it is only a matter of time before the Socialists demonstrate their inability to govern France competently.

Yet even should the Socialists' reflationary dash for growth fail, and their management of affairs (however different) prove no more successful than that of the predecessor government—a likely prospect—the ex-majority's failure to come up with an attractive alternative and the loss of credibility it suffered during its 23 years in power will mean that the Socialists should be able to hold on to their clientele for a considerable period.